

Mass layoffs begin in cities and states amid coronavirus fallout, threatening education, sanitation, health and safety

By Tony Romm [close](#) Tony Romm Senior tech policy reporter [Email](#) [Email Bio](#) [Bio Follow](#) [Follow](#)

In Michigan, some unstaffed highway rest stops are shuttered. In Santa Barbara, Calif., local librarians are out of a job. Dayton, Ohio, has ordered furloughs at nearly every agency, and in Arlington, Tex., police officers and firefighters may soon see painful cuts.

Facing an urgent financial crisis, these and other cities and states nationwide are eyeing dramatic reductions to their workforces, threatening critical public-sector employees and first responders at a time when many Americans may need their local governments' help the most.

Even as President Trump and top Republicans contend that only big-spending, liberal-leaning states are to blame for mounting budget woes, a Washington Post review found the economic havoc wrought by the novel coronavirus is far more widespread — saddling Democratic and Republican mayors and governors alike with [souring finances and major revenue gaps](#). Some local governments have already started laying off or furloughing thousands of their workers, and the numbers are likely to grow markedly in the absence of federal aid.

Among municipalities, the new budget cuts could be profound: Between 300,000 and 1 million public-sector workers could soon be out of a job or sent home without pay, according to an estimate from the National League of Cities. The steep reductions in staffing levels could affect education, sanitation, safety and health, local leaders warn, potentially leaving critical public services in disarray.

For governors, mayors and other top local officials, their economic troubles stem from the precipitous drops in revenue that have come as a result of closed businesses and sharp decreases in shopping and travel. The extent of the disruptions is poised to reach a level not seen since the Great Recession more than a decade ago, a reality that has prompted many city and state leaders to plead with Washington for help.

But their public quest for federal cash has been met with staunch political resistance from Republicans, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), who at one point [suggested states should have the option of falling into bankruptcy](#). Top Trump administration officials have echoed that skepticism and signaled that any aid would come with conditions: On Tuesday, for example, the president said he would approve money only if states cracked down on immigration policies in “sanctuary cities.”

The recalcitrance on Capitol Hill and at the White House has sparked a lobbying blitz on the part of local governments, which have had no choice but to make painful cuts as they await action in Washington.

In Dayton, for example, Democratic Mayor Nan Whaley said the city has already

furloughed 470 of its 1,900 employees, about a 25 percent reduction in staff that has affected public services including the city's water department. Whaley said officials may have to institute an additional 18 percent across-the-board reduction in the next fiscal year if they don't see federal support soon — a move she said would affect police officers and threaten residents with “slow response time.”

“It will fundamentally change how we do business long term,” Whaley said.

For many cities and states, their public push for federal aid reflects the urgency of their need: Many have argued that Washington's intransigence threatens to exacerbate the pandemic, which has killed more than 60,000 Americans nationwide. That's because tax revenue typically helps fund first responders, and there's only so much governments can do amid the downturn to shield public safety from withering cuts.

In doing so, many mayors and governors have argued that they are economic engines in their own right, employing more than 19 million municipal employees, or about one-tenth of the country's workforce, according to federal data from March. Local leaders say they are just as deserving of federal support as major businesses, which have captured the lion's share of [coronavirus](#) aid dollars authorized by Congress in March and April.

“They understand and know this would be a disaster if they didn't get the kind of aid from the federal government they need,” said Lee Saunders, the president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, AFL-CIO, whose union represents public-sector employees. “They need to be a priority just as the corporations and small businesses were.”

Last month, Congress extended \$150 billion to cities and states as part of the [\\$2 trillion coronavirus aid package](#) signed by Trump. Quickly, though, local leaders discovered the funds came with significant caveats. Only large cities, for example, received direct payments under the legislation, known as the Cares Act. The money also was limited to coronavirus-related expenses that governments did not anticipate in their most recent budgets, according to the Treasury Department, narrowing its use considerably.

In practice, cities and states could not tap their federal allotments to close revenue gaps, even though some of their shortfalls are the result of the coronavirus pandemic. The limitations greatly frustrated officials in states such as New Jersey, where [Gov. Phil Murphy \(D\) on Thursday wagered](#) that he might have no choice but to return some of the money.

Democratic and Republican governors say they realistically need \$500 billion to help close the enormous budget holes they face — or else they risk debilitating cuts. Already, the bleak financial picture has led Pennsylvania to furlough thousands of state workers. Ohio has implemented a hiring freeze. Scores of additional states are anticipating revenue gaps that may leave them no choice but to reduce their labor forces, either temporarily or for longer.

Michigan this month laid off 2,900 municipal employees, a giant, early cut that reflects the dangers of its looming \$7 billion shortfall. More than half of its Department of State, which handles driver and vehicle transactions, is out of work for at least the next two weeks, though local officials insist the staff reductions won't affect operations.

The National League of Cities, meanwhile, has sought \$250 billion on behalf of municipalities around the country, nearly all of which anticipate slashing [spending and staff to deal with unexpected shortfalls](#). The NLC came to its dour prediction — perhaps 1 million layoffs or furloughs in cities and towns nationwide — in part by extrapolating data from jurisdictions that have announced major reductions in their workforces.

Los Angeles has considered furloughing 15,000 workers, according to the NLC, and Tulsa has sent home 1,000 people without pay, representing a third of the city's labor force. Other cities including Allentown, Pa., and Boulder, Colo., are starting with cuts to temporary or seasonal employees, joining many communities that have targeted workers at parks and other public staples closed because of stay-at-home orders.

Some of the cuts directly threaten police officers and firefighters. Baltimore has considered about \$11 million in total reductions that may affect first responders, which could result in wage freezes or furloughs. The idea has sparked concern among labor unions, which say it would harm response times.

[Oklahoma City](#) anticipates that its broader austerity measures won't be enough to spare public safety agencies in the end, either. "We'll do the best we can to limit the impact on services we provide as we prepare for a new economic reality," the city's budget director said in a statement last week.

In Arlington, Tex., one of the state's largest metropolitan areas, Republican Mayor Jeff Williams said it is bracing for budget trouble, too. In a normal year, professional sports, amusement parks and an influx of college students help round out the city's finances, infusing much-needed revenue from shopping and tourism. But such spending has ground to a halt, imperiling the city's balance sheet — and potentially its workforce.

Arlington's leaders already have asked agencies to plan for reductions in spending between 10 and 25 percent, according to Williams, who described the potential for layoffs or furloughs as a worst-case scenario that residents would feel immediately.

"That would reduce our trash pickup less than what it is," he said. "We would have to reduce the maintenance and reconstruction of some of our streets." And public safety wouldn't be spared, either. "We couldn't help but affect our police and firefighters because of the deep cuts," he said.

This month, Williams joined about 100 Texas mayors from both parties to issue a public plea to Congress, urging lawmakers to adopt "direct and flexible fiscal assistance" in their next coronavirus aid bill. Some officials have found a receptive ear among Democratic leaders on Capitol Hill, who joined union leaders on a call Tuesday pledging they would work aggressively to secure such federal aid.

"Congress should not abandon any workers, especially public service workers," Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) said.

Republicans, however, have countered that Washington shouldn't fund cities and states with finances that soured long before the pandemic reached the United States. Trump has echoed those complaints, at one point charging that the states in greatest need tend to lean Democratic, even as he has expressed openness to a new local aid package.

"The federal government is not bailing out anyone," White House spokesman Judd

Deere said in a statement, adding that the White House would take “bold, aggressive action to help those most impacted by this unforeseen enemy so that we emerge from this challenge stronger and with a prosperous and growing economy.”

In fact, the calls for federal aid have been bipartisan, And many states entered the latest economic downturn in a far better financial position than they did the 2008 recession, thanks in part to healthier cash reserves. The data has not assuaged Republicans, including McConnell, who told [Politico in an interview](#) that the Senate would not “finance mistakes they’ve made unrelated to the coronavirus.” His office declined to comment for this story.

Other Republicans led by Sen. Rick Scott (R-Fla.) similarly have mobilized in opposition to open-ended aid to struggling city and state governments, breaking with local officials even in the states they represent. “We believe additional money sent to the states for ‘lost revenue’ or without appropriate safeguards will be used to bail out unfunded pensions, reward decades of state mismanagement, and incentivize states to become more reliant on federal taxpayers,” Scott wrote in a draft letter to the president, which he has circulated among his colleagues for signatures. His office confirmed the letter, which attacks New York and Illinois for their financial decisions.

The political gamesmanship has left some city and state leaders anticipating significant delays before federal officials pay them a dime, if it ever comes through at all, leaving many municipal workers out of a job or without pay, while harming their families and those their governments serve.

“This is not about bailing out local governments that have done something wrong, because we’ve not, we’ve stepped up,” said Clarence Anthony, the leader of the National League of Cities. He added, “Playing with the lives of people over a narrative that is not accurate is just not right.”

Council backs bare bones solution to cash crunch

David Delcore Staff Writer

MONTPELIER — The Capital City will have a lowercase workforce starting next week, when 30 municipal employees are placed on voluntary furlough as part of cost-saving plan designed to avoid the wave of red ink being forecast due to the COVID-19 crisis.

City councilors unanimously approved the two-part plan – one that deals with most, but not all, of a projected \$500,000 operating deficit – during its virtual meeting Wednesday night.

Acting on the recommendation of City Manager Bill Fraser and Finance Director Kelly Murphy, councilors embraced the plan they were told would keep furloughed employees “whole” – and leave some better off – while authorizing an additional \$245,000 in budget reductions between now and the end of the fiscal year.

Councilors were told the combined effect of the two-pronged plan would leave the city facing a projected operating deficit of \$113,000 when the fiscal year ends on June 30. However, they were urged to “let the pandemic play out” before deciding how to deal with that anticipated shortfall.

The furloughs will start next Tuesday, and are projected to save roughly \$192,000 if they remain in place through June 30. Approximately \$40,000 of that savings will be realized by the city’s water and sewer funds. That leaves \$152,000 to help cover operating deficits now being projected in the general fund (\$247,000), the parking fund (\$203,000), as well as net losses (just over \$51,000) linked to canceled programming at Recreation Department and the Montpelier Senior Activity Center.

Fraser told councilors employee response to the voluntary furlough was better than expected. City officials had hoped as many as 25 employees would take the option, but 30 did.

That will put a detectable dent in the city’s workforce, which includes 116 full-time equivalents – a number that reflects part-time and seasonal help.

The city’s police and fire and ambulance departments will remain fully operational, as will the water and wastewater treatment facilities. But Fraser said most other departments will be short-staffed for the foreseeable future and services will be curtailed.

“It will be a really ‘basics only’ city for the next two or three months,” he said.

According to Fraser, streets will be swept and striped and potholes will be patched, as needed, but a preponderance of the work planned for completion this spring will be deferred.

Fraser said opening the pool this summer seems iffy at best and it is unclear when recreation programs could resume and the senior center be reopened and predicted the current crisis will have “ripple effects” that will have to be dealt with in the

coming fiscal year.

The plan approved by the council is designed to get ahead of that problem without severely depleting a \$740,000 unassigned fund balance, which councilors were told could be used to offset some, or all of the projected operating deficit. However, Murphy said that surplus already is less than the policy suggests the city should hold in reserve.

The recommended alternative involved a mix of budget reductions, furlough savings, and what Murphy described as a “wait-and-see approach” that would likely involved decisions made after July 1.

Some, if not most, of the 30 employees who volunteered to be furloughed will likely earn more by being paid to stay home, thanks to a \$600 weekly supplemental benefit included in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act. That money would be paid weekly in addition to Vermont’s maximum unemployment benefit of \$513 a week.

In order to entice employees to volunteer to be furloughed, the city agreed to extend health insurance and other benefits without any gaps in coverage through June 30 and to advance an annual merit pay of \$650 to \$750 to employees to help cover the five-day waiting period for obtaining unemployment benefits.

Though the furloughs are anticipated to run through June 30, the city has reserved the right to recall some – or all – employees back before then, and hasn’t rule out extending the furlough beyond July 1, though that is not currently the plan. The additional federal subsidy is available through July 31.

More than half of the \$245,000 in budget reductions authorized by the council Wednesday night – nearly \$143,000 – is tied to work that would otherwise have been done and materials that would otherwise have been used by the public works department during the spring construction season.

The next biggest reduction should be a \$52,500 cut from an equipment line item that would finance a future bond payment for a new ambulance. The only department that proposed cutting more than \$10,000 was the parks department, which accounts for roughly \$19,500 of the total.

The only proposed reduction that generated any conversation among councilors involved \$9,500 that was belatedly added to the budget at the request of the Social and Economic Justice Advisory Committee. The committee plans to use the funds, an additional \$10,000 that was included in this year’s budget and money it has yet to privately raise to hire a consultant to complete a social and economic justice assessment project.

Councilors said they remained supportive of the project and open to considering an additional appropriation during budget deliberations later this year, but stopped short of making a commitment.

“Our heart is there, but I have no way of making a promise now when so much is unknown,” Councilor Dona Bate said.

Though councilors unanimously approved the plan for dealing with the projected deficit, they balked at the recommendation that all committee meetings, with the exception of the Development Review Board, be canceled during the duration of the employee furlough.

The council did agree to suspend committee work until its next meeting, when Fraser has been asked to report back on the viability of allowing some committees to meet remotely without the staff support they typically have.

david.delcore @timesargus.com

Voluntary furloughs expected to save Barre \$175,000

David Delcore Staff Writer

BARRE — In a cost-cutting move necessitated by the COVID-19 crisis, roughly 20 percent of city employees started voluntary furloughs Monday.

City Manager Steve Mackenzie, who had hoped as many as 10 municipal employees would volunteer to be placed on furlough by Friday's deadline, said Monday he was pleasantly surprised when 18 agreed.

In a city with 92 full-time employees, that's a significant chunk of the workforce. It is bigger still when you consider more than half of the city's employees – those who work for the police and fire and ambulance departments, as well as emergency dispatchers and those responsible for operating the water and wastewater treatment plants, weren't eligible.

When you add in Mackenzie and his department heads – most of whom are now working remotely with City Hall closed to the public – many of the employees who were able to be furloughed actually volunteered.

Mackenzie said that will go a long way toward wiping out what remains of a projected year-end deficit that at one point was pushing \$500,000 due to an anticipated loss of \$400,000 in revenue tied to the current pandemic.

By this time last week, Mackenzie had trimmed the projected deficit to roughly \$200,000 – as was the case in Montpelier – furloughs were offered as a way to make up at least some of the difference.

Assuming all 18 employees remain on furlough through the end of the fiscal year on June 30, Mackenzie said the city should save roughly \$175,000. That will turn a once-daunting deficit into something significantly more manageable.

Mackenzie said many – if not most – of those who elected to be furloughed shouldn't be hurt financially by the decision and several could come out ahead based on an enhanced unemployment benefit that is now available.

According to rough calculations, Mackenzie said the city determined those earning less than \$22-an-hour be better off collecting unemployment given the fixed benefit of \$600-a-week they will receive in addition to up to \$513 a week they would otherwise collect in unemployment. The supplemental benefit, which was included in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act approved by Congress, is scheduled to remain in effect for eligible employees through July 31.

Mackenzie said he expects to recall workers well before then, though some could return to work on an as-needed basis before the June 30 date he has in mind for most.

According to Mackenzie, the enhanced unemployment benefit and the city's ability to maintain the full range of benefits for furloughed employees made the decision easier

for city staff than it otherwise would have been, while preventing the need for layoffs and putting a detectable dent in the projected deficit.

“The fundamental objective was cost savings and I think we’ve achieved that,” Mackenzie said.

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City of Plattsburgh furloughs 24 employees in effort to offset mounting deficit

■ Posted: Apr 23, 2020 / 08:00 PM EDT / Updated: Apr 24, 2020 / 11:38 AM EDT

Faced with a deficit of nearly \$4 million, the City of Plattsburgh has laid off 7 municipal employees and furloughed another two dozen.

Mayor Colin Read said the moves were necessary, but won't solve the problem.

"The steps we're taking right now aren't going to fill that hole," he said. "It's going to help fill that hole, it's going to put us in a better position to dig deeper if we have to. But it does by no means solve the whole extent of the problem."

Read said the furloughed workers will return to work as soon as Gov. Andrew Cuomo ends New York's stay-at-home directive, which was recently extended until May 15. Read said he wouldn't be surprised if that gets extended.

"Once that order is lifted, we can start bringing back some of our workers that would normally work in this building, work with customers etc, and obviously they cant do that from home," Read said. "We've got about 40 employees in total working from home, some more effectively than others. Some jobs don't let people work from home, and those people are essentially idle."

Read may bring more people on the payroll, he said, as needs change.

"We do a lot of seasonal work, for instance road repairs occurs at a certain parts of the season," he said. "And as the budget improves, and if we need to bring them back, we'll bring them back. "

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City furloughs about 30 workers

Madeline Clark | The Other Paper

About 30 employees with the City of South Burlington are temporarily out of a job, after being furloughed on Friday, April 17.

The change comes in anticipation of decreased revenue due to the economic impact of COVID-19 across nearly all sectors.

“We feel it’s fiscally prudent and it recognizes the fact that many of our residents are unemployed at this time,” City Manager Kevin Dorn said. “The impetus for all of this is the realization that our budget is going to be significantly affected by this downturn in the economy.”

Furloughed employees’ benefits, including pension and healthcare, will continue, Dorn said.

The affected employees have been offered information sheets and a help desk to aid in their application for state unemployment insurance and the \$600 per week federal boost, Dorn said.

“Our goal is to keep our employees whole, from an income standpoint, utilizing the state and federal benefit, but to realize savings to the taxpayers for time spent not working,” Dorn said.

The employees include both full- and part-time staff, several of whom voluntarily opted into the furlough plan.

Essential workers including department heads, police officers and firefighters were exempt.

The length of the furlough has not yet been determined. It will depend upon when the governor says employees can return to work, and when the city feels it can bring employees back, Dorn said.

The city anticipated furloughing 17 additional workers from the department of public works. However, Gov. Phil Scott signed an amendment to his stay-home order easing some regulations, last week. The move allowed for South Burlington to keep public works employees on the job.

Making the decision

When city offices closed in accordance with the stay-home order, nonessential employees began to work from home, and some were placed on paid administrative leave.

“We felt that the time period involved was not so long that we couldn’t do that,” Dorn said.

The stay-at-home order expiration was later extended from April 15 to May 15, with

the governor saying the state reopening would occur in phases.

Normally, South Burlington collects about \$3.7 million, annually, from its local option tax on sales, rooms and meals and alcohol, Dorn said. With the stay-at-home order keeping customers from stores, hotels, restaurants and bars, the city anticipates about a \$500,000 decrease in local option tax revenue for the 2020 fiscal year.

If the stay at home order continues, the decrease in local option tax could impact the FY21 budget, which begins on July 1, Dorn said.

Another potential revenue loss could be realized this summer. Some residents may struggle to pay property taxes, the first installation of which is due in August, Dorn said.

“We won’t know the effect of that until then. But we’re taking this furlough measure in an effort to try to reduce the deficit we may be facing,” he said.

In late March, the city froze its FY20 budget discretionary spending to lessen the financial impact of COVID-19. That included delaying some paving and vehicle purchases, Dorn said.

Dorn added that he and Deputy City Manager Tom Hubbard will be “sharpening their pencils” to tackle FY21 issues.

It’s too early to say whether the city will be able to deliver all of the services in the voter-approved FY21 budget, he said.

Timeline

The first mention of potential furloughs made to employees happened during a virtual meeting on Wednesday, April 15, Dorn said. About 60 employees phoned in.

By Thursday, all employees were told furloughs of nonessential workers would take place. On Friday evening, furlough notices were sent to the affected workers.

Furloughs were not discussed during a city council meeting. Councilors were informed of potential furloughs on Friday, April 10, Dorn said.

“We sacrificed a long lead time to eliminate the gap for employees in pay,” Dorn said.

Employees were furloughed at the close of their two-week pay period. Their wages from the city will arrive on Thursday, April 23 and, if their unemployment applications are filed and approved as planned, they should receive their first unemployment benefit the following week, Dorn explained. He added that the unemployment checks should be reflective back to the date of furlough.

Dorn hoped furloughed city employees’ unemployment applications would fall into “appropriate sequencing” with the state. He said the city was aware of state plans to clear its backlog of unemployment insurance claims.

The Department of Labor was directed by Gov. Phil Scott to clear that backlog by Saturday, April 18.

City officials were also aware that most people would be receiving their \$1,200 federal stimulus checks within the next two weeks.

On Sunday, April 19, South Burlington Director of Community Engagement & Innovations, Coralee Holm, offered help to furloughed employees with their unemployment insurance applications.

By Monday, April 20, many had applied, Dorn said.

Employees

Todd Gregory, South Burlington engineering inspector and chair of the employee's union said the city was offering a "great deal of" support and guidance to its workers through the unemployment process.

"In regards to lead time I feel the city was very fair in how they brought this to us and personally have no idea how they could have done a better job," he wrote in an email.

When asked what he might say to employees who were frustrated with the furloughs, Dorn said: "The city has shown its commitment to maintaining their pay and benefits as best we can, being respectful to the taxpayers."

Before the furloughs, South Burlington provided administrative leave and did not ask employees to deplete hours from their sick, comp and vacation time to make up unworked hours, Dorn said.

"I think we've honored our commitment to our employees, and I think the program we're setting up continues to honor that commitment to our employees. This is hard on everybody. We have something like 30% unemployment in the state. These are difficult times," he said.

The city believes employees will be back to their normal jobs soon, he said, and he was hopeful that with the governor's April 17 address, the state would begin its gradual reopening soon.

"As a city manager, I've got to look out for the interests of the taxpayers and residents and our employees at the same time," Dorn said.



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er,” Greshin said. “It’s meant to keep the lights on, keep our programs humming and set us up for a more spirited and fully educated debate come late summer.”

Greshin said the proposed cuts will have “minor, if any impact across most departments” given that they will be shared across state government.

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“We’re thinking that it’s not going to be a major issue for any one department but it will be, call it, slight pain spread broadly,” Greshin said.

Rep. Mary Hooper, D-Montpelier, pointed out that it may be hard for some departments with large staffs to absorb the cuts when state employees are also expected to see pay increases next year.

“This is going to be a real challenge, again, for departments like say the Department of Corrections, probably Public Safety, that have 24/7 obligations that they can’t say ‘No, we’ll do that tomorrow,’” she said.

The House Appropriations Committee will be reviewing the administration’s plan to give state agencies 23% of this year’s budget in the upcoming quarter, and may make changes.

“Twenty-three is it a magic number? Is 22 the number, is 24 the number, is something in between the number?” asked Rep. Kitty Toll, D-Danville, chair of the House Appropriations Committee.

She noted that the more difficult decisions about next year’s budget, and potential cuts, will come when lawmakers and the administration reductions work on the full spending package over the summer.

“No matter what, the hard budget’s going to be the one we do in August,” Toll said.

According to the [latest projections](#) from the state’s fiscal analysts, revenues in fiscal 2021 are expected to fall by \$374 million across all state funds because of the Covid-19 crisis — a drop of about 15%.

While most departments have been asked to cut

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Response to the Covid-19 crisis.

The Scott administration was expected to unveil a separate plan to spend a portion of that funding on economic relief on Wednesday.

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About Xander

Xander Landen is VTDigger's political reporter. He previously worked at the Keene Sentinel covering crime, courts and local government. Xander got his start in public radio, writing and producing stories for NPR affiliates including WBUR in Boston and WNYC in New York. While at WNYC, he contributed to an award-winning investigation of how police departments shield misconduct records from the public. He is a graduate of Tufts University and his work has also appeared in PBS NewsHour and The Christian Science Monitor.



Email: xlanden@vtdigger.org

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Journalism Trust

26 State Street, Suite 8

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contact@vtdigger.org

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